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COUNSELING AND READING SKILLS FOR THE TERMINAL STUDENT.

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THE COUNSELING TECHNIQUES AND READING SKILLS FOR TERMINAL STUDENTS AT MIRACOSTA COLLEGE IN CALIFORNIA ARE DISCUSSED. AT MIRACOSTA COLLEGE, STUDENTS ARE ADMINISTERED A STANDARD GROUP DIAGNOSTIC READING TEST. TO INSURE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR ABILITIES AND DEFICIENCIES, THEY ARE INFORMED OF TEST RESULTS. READING MATERIALS 2 YEARS BELOW THE LEVEL INDICATED BY THE STANDARDIZED TEST ARE USED INITIALLY. INITIAL SUCCESS AS WELL AS CLASSROOM CLIMATE IS IMPORTANT. COUNSELING IS CONDUCTED AT THE SAME TIME AS REMEDIAL READING IS TAUGHT AND IS A CONTINUOUS PROCESS. SELF-EVALUATION IS ALSO CONTINUOUS. PROBLEM AREAS INCLUDE THE LACK OF DIVERSIFIED MATERIAL, THE LACK OF TRAINED TEACHING PERSONNEL, THE LACK OF PUBLIC AWARENESS, AND THE USE OF LETTER GRADES AS AN EVALUATIVE DEVICE. THE BENEFITS FROM THE PROGRAM ARE INCREASED ENROLLMENT, LOW DROPOUT RATE, DEMANDS FOR COMMUNITY SERVICE, REALISTIC SELF-APPRAISAL BY THE STUDENT, AND DEMAND FOR INSERVICE TRAINING. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED TO THE NATIONAL READING CONFERENCE (ST. PETERSBURG, DECEMBER 1, 1966). (BK)

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Paper presented to the

NATIONAL READING CONFERENCE, ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA, DECEMBER 1, 1966

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Fallacy of Terms

"Oh, Johnny! Not again." A distraught young mother was watching her small son hurriedly trying to replace on some spice jars the labels which he had but a few moments before removed. As a result of Johnny's endeavors, all sorts of errors were evident. What should have been celery salt was cinnamon. What should have been cloves was pepper. But just because the labels on the spice jars were misleading, was no indication that Johnny's mother could not use the spices. All she had to do was carefully examine the contents of each and every jar to determine what was really there.

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This little story simply serves to illustrate the ridiculousness of labels which we attach, many times, to students in educational institutions. Many times these labels are just as misleading as were the labels which Johnny replaced on his mother's spice jars.

If we, as teachers, are going to fully develop the native abilities of the students entrusted to our guidance, we simply cannot categorically label them terminal, remedial, MH, EH, MR, or any of the other alphabetical designations which we find so convenient to use. Rather, just as Johnny's mother had to carefully examine the contents of the spice jars before she could use them correctly, so also should we carefully examine the accuracy, or perhaps the inaccuracy, of the labels which have been attached to our students.

What do we know realistically, about the individual student's personal hopes and aspirations, about his socio-economic background, about his true educational background? Or is it merely a convenient device to enable us to group him with others wearing the same label? If it is, then we can subject him to a prescribed and arbitrary curriculum which is supposed to be an educational catharsis for every student in that group. But as we all know, this procedure is proving to be woefully inadequate.

When the terms or labels that are used as the title of this presentation, "Counseling and Reading Skills for the Terminal Student," are heard, what -- exactly -- do these terms convey to you?

What do we mean by the term, counseling? Is counseling an actual attempt to help the student realistically appraise his true, individual potential for life, or is it an expeditious attempt to simply schedule him into the classes that are designed to pacify the educational inadequacies which he possesses? How much true counseling took place in the case of Albert Einstein, for example, when, in his early years, because of an erroneous label, it was suggested that he be placed in an institution for the mentally retarded?

Or what do we mean by the label, terminal student? For what is he terminal? When we use the label, reading skills, what does this label actually mean in relation to the individual student? Are the reading skills that we are going to teach this terminal student the reading skills that are necessary for the academician, or are we talking about the reading skills that are needed to equip this particular individual for a useful and productive life?

The Terminal Student

Let us consider this so-called terminal student. Undoubtedly this person knows in his own mind that he cannot read. He has probably experienced this situation for the last ten years of his academic life. Every year he knows that the situation gets progressively worse because the material that he is expected to decipher becomes increasingly difficult. In the fall of the year when he starts to school, he knows without a doubt that he is going to fail in everything where reading is required. And yet, we expect this student to be a lovable, nice, well-behaved individual in the classroom.

How many of you would like to go to work tomorrow and the day after and the day after that, and know without a doubt that you are going to be told by your employer or your supervisor that everything that you do, or practically everything that you do, throughout the entire day is wrong; that you don't understand; that you aren't applying yourself. If you ask for help, direction, or guidance so that you can improve, very little, if anything, is done to help you individually. In like manner, the only hope that the terminal student has is that someone is actually going to help him and give him guidance and direction. He does know, or probably has heard, that there are new techniques, new concepts of teaching reading, new technologies involved that possibly can help him with the decipherization of the symbols on the printed page, a feat which he has not been able to accomplish the last ten years of his life. But in the meantime, he knows that he has probably acquired a label putting him in a specific category with others of his kind that will designate to his future teachers his lack of reading ability.

The Classroom Teacher

On the other hand, let us consider the reading teacher who is confronted with a classroom of anywhere from fifteen to forty people of this caliber. Undoubtedly he will have many levels of reading ability within his class. He will have many levels of capacity within his class. He will have all sorts of educational backgrounds represented. In California, as most of you know, if the student is eighteen years of age and a resident of California, the Junior College must enroll him whether or not he has finished high school. There will be all sorts

of socio-economic backgrounds. There is also the consideration of why the student is attempting to come to college at all. Is it because he, himself, really has the desire and is deluding himself into thinking that he can achieve when he basically knows that he can't read well? Or is it because of parental direction and the status symbolism of having a child attend college? Or is it possibly because he is trying to escape the draft? These and a multitude of other problems confront the teacher when he meets this class of forty individuals the first day.

Classroom Situation

What is the classroom situation? At MiraCosta, any student who achieves a raw score of fourteen or below on the ACT test must take the reading development course -- remedial reading -- if you prefer. The classes will range in size from fifteen to forty students. Naturally there is going to be a high diversification of lack of skills which these individuals are going to display. In most classrooms the usual procedure is to prescribe the same "medicine" for everybody in the class.

Looking at a classroom situation like this on the first day, we might well compare it to forty patients sitting in a doctor's office. Wouldn't it be just a little bit ridiculous for a doctor to say to these forty patients who have all sorts of individual aches and pains, "Okay, today we all are going to take APC's and if that doesn't work, tomorrow we will all take aspirin, and the following day we will all take bufferin." The sheer ridiculousness of such a situation becomes apparent, and yet in most cases, this is exactly what we do with students who come to us

to improve reading skills. They have a high diversification of lack of ability, and yet we prescribe the same "medicine" for each and every one. There is no consideration whatsoever of the individual needs or wants or desires. All students will start with the same lesson and will proceed at the same rate regardless of individual deficiencies. Therefore, at this point, real counseling has to start.

Classroom at MiraCosta -- General

At MiraCosta, we do our own classroom testing to enable us to begin the diagnosis of individual lack of abilities. We start with a group test and we can arrive at reliable scores for a large percentage of the people within the class. But for a number of these students, the scores fall into the extrapolated area. They have to be tested with a lower ability-level test so that we can arrive at some type of reliable grade placement for them. In some cases the abilities are so lacking in the field of reading that non-verbal tests have to be administered. What we want to ascertain is a relatively reliable grade placement, as well as to determine the greatest area of deficiency of the individual student, not for the group as a whole. When we have obtained these scores, and we have found what appears to be the greatest area of difficulty, we can then give the individual student a realistic appraisal of his deficiencies. It is vitally important that the student understand without a doubt what his abilities are, and possibly even what his potential capacities may be. Without the benefit of this realistic appraisal, the instructor cannot hope to establish rapport with a particular student. There must be a common understanding as to where the person's innate abilities and potentialities actually lie. On

the other hand, the student must also realize and understand his limitations.

Classroom at MiraCosta -- Specific

At MiraCosta each student is started in reading materials at least two years below the level of the ability as shown by the standardized test. In this manner, the student who has, as we have mentioned before, experienced nothing but failure, frustration, and defeat in any kind of reading situation, suddenly finds a situation in which he can achieve with at least some degree of success. This is vitally important, because when we start to work with this individual and start to increase the difficulty of the material being read, and start to increase the difficulty of the vocabulary level, he is not confronted with a multitude of errors which he finds completely overwhelming, but is confronted with one, two, or three errors on an individual paper. These errors can be discussed with the instructor, and the instructor can counsel him in terms of improvement of that particular skill where the error was self-evident. During this process, the student and the teacher are developing a rapport. A motivation starts to develop for the student to increase his proficiency in reading because he finds that he is not faced with recriminations, or sneering remarks about his lack of ability. Rather, he finds a genuine interest, a genuine empathy from the instructor to his particular problem. The reading laboratory is a place where he can make mistakes and know without a doubt that he is going to be shown in a kindly and sympathetic manner how to avoid those mistakes in the future. No longer is he simply a number in a class, but he is confronted individually with the errors which he individually has

made, and the confrontation is made in an atmosphere of understanding and compassion, and a sincere desire to help the student improve the particular skill with which he is having difficulty.

Classroom at MiraCosta -- True Counseling

In like manner, the discussion of what this person really wants to accomplish in life becomes live and vibrant, and it becomes simplicity exemplified for the instructor to find out what really is inside this person. What does he want and need to accomplish? What are the goals that this person as an individual human being wants to fulfill? Through these discussions day by day and week by week, true counseling takes place on a continuous basis and not on a one-shot basis, "Take this class because it will do you some good." There is continuous self-evaluation -- the checking of improvement or lack thereof in various areas -- the evaluation as to whether or not this student is achieving what he wants for himself instead of fulfilling what the teacher thinks should be accomplished for everybody en masse.

As a result of this type of individual work within a classroom situation, we find that the label, terminal student, which we gave to many students really is not applicable. We find that many of these students have a tremendous capacity. Once they are motivated to do something to help themselves and are given the assistance , which they individually need to improve their own inadequacies, they can no longer be classed as terminal. Many improve their reading skills to the point that they do have the possibility of achieving satisfactorily in a four-year institution.

Problem Areas

Materials

But there are many problems that exist. Because we find this high diversification of lack of skills, we need a high diversification of teaching materials. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that any publisher or any author can present a text which is going to be the answer to all the problems we find in any given classroom situation. But with the acquisition of various materials from various publishers, we can adapt these materials individually to fit the needs of a particular student. This is what we are attempting to do at MiraCosta.

Teaching Personnel

Another problem is the lack of properly trained teaching personnel. Our teacher-training institutions, on the whole, are training teachers on the basis of a structured classroom situation. A structured classroom situation in the field of reading, particularly in the field of remedial reading, simply is anathema. Our whole philosophy of instruction has to be changed if we are going to accomplish that which we want to accomplish in our school systems. We must educate the individual according to his own limits and not according to a preconceived notion that every student should be an academician. School administrations also must change their viewpoints as to the importance of the whole field of reading, not only on the junior college level, but specifically in the elementary, the intermediate, the junior high, and the senior high schools.

Administration and the Public

We are fortunate at MiraCosta because we have an administration, as well as a Board of Trustees, who realize that reading ability is a paramount need for anyone who wants to achieve, regardless of level.

The general public as well has to be properly informed about this vital aspect of education. If we continue to try to make everybody fit an average and to put everybody into a particular mold, we in the reading field might just as well resign. We are never going to achieve that which we are attempting to achieve if we ignore individual differences. In fact, this destroys our whole basis of educational psychology -- the fact is that we, as individuals, are different and always will be different in all respects.

Grading

Another problem that arises with this type of classroom instruction is the letter grade. If a student advances significantly in overall reading skills, but is still far below the point where he theoretically should be, on what basis do we grade him? Do we grade him on the basis of improvement, or do we grade him on the basis of where he should be at his chronological age? Our present system of A, B, C, D, and F grades is ridiculous, to say the least. The entire concept of letter grading has to be revised if we are to adequately educate the individual rather than the group. If the concept that we should educate the individual for life rather than for college ever becomes prevalent, we can then perhaps arrive at a sensible evaluation of progress.

Our greatest concern should be the student who is brought to the level of reading which is commensurate with his chronological age. This student develops an exuberant enthusiasm to continue his education, and ultimately receive a degree from a four-year institution. He has found that this whole system of reading and proper acquisition of knowledge isn't nearly as difficult as he thought it was. But the serious problem that presents itself now is the fact that this person still lacks a tremendous amount of background material which he should have been absorbing through his junior and his senior high school years. As a result, even though his reading ability has been enhanced and improved and has been brought to the level to fit the mold, he still is going to have an extremely serious problem in achieving in a four-year institution in competition with those people who have this wealth of background information he lacks. For this reason, we should carefully review our entire educational system. It is not enough to provide him with the basic skills. We must also provide him with the opportunity to "catch up" in order that he may fully utilize his God-given potential.

Concepts Used at MiraCosta

What, then, is our concept of "Counseling and Reading Skills for the Terminal Student" at MiraCosta?

Counseling cannot be a half hour session with a counselor in the administration office. Rather, it must be a continuous process with the instructor if it is to be effective.

Reading skills for the individual student must be improved on the basis of individual need rather than on the basis of complete perfection of

all skills for all students. The program of instruction must be completely flexible to meet these needs.

The label "terminal student" should be discarded. Even as we use the term, not all students so labeled are "terminal."

Why don't we start to counsel and educate people for life rather than for college? If that life leads to college, with proper counseling, the student will be prepared to meet the challenge. If, on the other hand, that life leads to endeavors not connected with the academic world, that student, with proper counseling, will also be prepared to meet the challenge. He will realize his capacities as well as his limitations.

Benefits

Enrollment

This approach at MiraCosta has produced some startling results. The Reading Laboratory is in its third year of operation. Initially, fewer than ten percent of the student body was enrolled -- these mainly by coercion. Today twenty-five percent of the student body is enrolled, and over half of these by choice -- not direction. We have many high caliber students in the Reading Improvement classes because they know they also are going to be helped individually in their areas of greatest weakness rather than be subjected to practicing skills in which they already are proficient.

Drop-outs

The drop-out rate for the low-level achiever has been nearly cut in half. This results from the fact that the average gain per student per semester is slightly over two years based on grade placement as shown by standardized tests.

Community Service

Because of the enthusiasm displayed by the students for the Reading Laboratory instruction, demands for evening classes for professional people from the community became increasingly abundant. As a result, a community service course for reading improvement is provided. These classes are comprised of doctors, dentists, military officers, the clergy, and other professional persons.

The stigma which is usually associated with a reading laboratory has been entirely dissipated. It isn't just the "dumb" students who participate in the program. Anyone who really wants to improve his skills goes to the Reading Laboratory because he knows there is no competition with peers -- only with himself. The extent of improvement lies with the student, not with the instructor.

Realistic Appraisal

In addition, the student who has looked upon himself unrealistically in the past has at least the opportunity to appraise himself realistically now. The important consideration is that he begins to develop

an idea of the "know-how" of reading; how to read the materials that are going to help him in his life, whether he be an auto mechanic, a plumber, an academician, or an opera singer. In our laboratory at MiraCosta it is of little concern to us that one student is learning how to read an automobile repair manual efficiently while the student next to him is learning how to read a chemistry lab manual efficiently. In either case he begins to develop an awareness of self, and he can begin to see himself in proper relationship to other people with the same problems. But more important, he begins to develop an appreciation of his own potential. He no longer is the brow-beaten student who has been assigned some ignominious label, which is probably completely meaningless anyway. If this person ultimately becomes a productive member of society, regardless of the level of achievement, instead of becoming another number on relief or prison rolls, all of the time, money, and effort that we will have put into this individual will have been well expended.

In-Service Training

Perhaps the most gratifying development of this program has been the demand from the local and surrounding elementary and high school districts to provide instruction in these techniques for teachers -- not reading teachers alone -- but for teachers from all the academic disciplines as well as administrators. With the cooperation of the local high school district, the Junior College administration, and San Diego State College, such a course is now being provided, and is being attended by forty people -- teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Summary

By no means do we intend to imply that we have all the answers. We are fully aware there are areas of weakness which exist in our program, but through conferences such as this and the exchange of ideas with others in the field, we aspire to the continuation of improvement. As the outgoing Chairman of the Board of Braniff Airways, Charles Beard, stated it: "Education should be a continuous state of constructive dissatisfaction."

If we, as teachers of reading, want to improve our programs we must look upon ourselves with constructive dissatisfaction. We must inspire this attitude in our students. If we do, what we accomplish or what our students accomplish, may be best expressed by this story.

A very wise philospher many years ago was sought out by people from all stations of life with all sorts of problems because this great philosopher could always give an answer which seemed to solve the problem at hand. Some young college students, in discussing this profound philosopher, finally decided that there must be some question they could ask him for which he could give no answer. After due consideration and deliberation, they finally arrived at a decision. We will get a little bird and put it in our hand, and we will say to the wise philosopher, "Mr. Philosopher, is this bird dead or alive?" If the philosopher says that it is dead, we will open our hand and let it fly away, but if he says that it is alive, we will crush it and kill it. We will thus have a question for which he can give no answer. So the boys caught their bird, and they went to see the philosopher. And they

said to him, "Mr. Philosopher, we think we have a problem here which you cannot solve. We have a bird in our hand, and we want you to tell us whether it is dead or whether it is alive." And the wise philosopher, after a few moments of thought, gave the boys this answer: "It is as you will."